

...ity, Southend-on-Sea, Essex Council, Thundersley, SS7 1TF.

Windowbox challenge

COUNCIL tenants in Southend are being urged to get their hands dirty and enter the Southend in Bloom competition.

South Essex Homes, the firm who manage the council's houses, hopes those who only have space for a window box or balcony display will join in the competition.

Communications manager Lynsey Stephenson said: "This is the chance for residents to show off their gardening skills and play a part in making Southend a more colourful place to live."

Thieves net £5,000 haul

TOYS worth more than £5,000 were stolen from a garage.

Thieves got into the garage of the house in New Road, Little Baddow, near Billericay by smashing the door's glass panel.

They then helped themselves to the haul of motorised toy helicopters and two transmitters. The break-in happened between 7.15pm and 5pm last Thursday.

THIEVES stole a £2,000 haul from a house in Clayburn Close, Basildon. They got in by smashing the front door and took various electrical items.

Bionic Man Mark in life-changing op

By EMMA PALMER

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REMOTE control pain relief and implanted electrodes may sound like something out of the 1970s TV series the Bionic Man, but for Mark Hollingworth it's the real deal.

Mark, 43, has undergone a groundbreaking operation at Basildon Hospital which has brought an end to three years of almost unbearable pain.

The IT specialist's ordeal began when he was on holiday in Egypt in 2006 and hurt his neck playing water polo.

It was only a slight injury, but the following day Mark collapsed in agony.

Mark, from Laindon, said: "My fiancée Wendy went out to buy the

□ Implant means he can control his pain

□ Injury occurred playing water polo

strongest painkillers she could find, but they didn't make the slightest difference.

"It was just unbearable."

Two weeks later, Mark saw an orthopaedic specialist at Basildon Hospital.

He said: "The pain was so bad I couldn't sleep.

"An MRI scan showed a disc in my neck had swollen out of shape and prolapsed.

"But I was told surgery was too risky. It could damage nearby nerves."

Almost ten months later a second MRI scan showed the disc problem had literally shot

Mark's nerve endings to pieces.

He said: "They were completely destroyed. That's what was causing the pain. My body was not able to send normal pain relieving messages so I was in agony all the time."

It was then that Mark was told about spinal cord stimulation, where doctors implant electrodes in the spine to reduce the pain.

The electrodes work by prompting the nerve to release chemicals to the brain which then block out the pain.

He said: "I was very keen to have the procedure as I could no longer drive, go out for a meal or even work. I also couldn't sleep."

Mark, who is now married to Wendy, 42, had the 90-minute operation to implant the electrodes last month. A week later

he had a permanent pulse generator with a battery implanted just above his left buttock.

Using a remote control, Mark can switch it on when he needs to.

He said: "I switch it on before I go to bed at night and I use it for about 40 per cent of the day."

But Mark stressed: "The operation wasn't a walk in the park by any means. It was very stressful in parts as it was so painful but in the end it's been worth it."

Mark is now on his way to completely getting off painkillers as the benefits of the operation sink in.

He added: "I would recommend this to anyone who has chronic pain. It's changed my life."

Council in secret talks with travellers

COUNCIL chiefs are having secret talks with travellers.

Basildon Council leader Malcolm Buckley, deputy leader Tony Ball and chief executive Bala Mahendran met 20 travellers led by spokesman Richard Sheridan for closed talks in Our Lady of Good Counsel Catholic Church,

Wickford. Mr Buckley initially said he was unable to discuss last Thursday's talks because of a prior secrecy agreement, but the council later put out a statement.

He said: "We are very pleased the meeting went so well, and it certainly laid the foundation for future positive discussions.

"While I made it very clear we are at the end of the planning process and Dale Farm and Hovefields must be cleared, we need to work with all parties to ensure an orderly withdrawal."

Talks were arranged by the Equalities and Human Rights Commission on agreement no media, public or campaigners

attended. Mr Buckley slammed travellers spokesman Gratton Puxon for releasing a negative account of the talks.

He said: "This was certainly not reflective of what happened at the meeting, nor of the notes provided by the commission which were agreed by people attending."

0-050 The Echo 2009 Apr 29

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